

## Event dedicated to the future of the European Union –

# EU at the Crossroads: How will 2017 national elections change the face of Europe?

*International Conference, 5 May 2017, Bratislava, Slovakia*

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Facing a number of crucially important elections taking place in several EU Member States in the course of the year 2017, IED together with **Mladí Európania** (Young Europeans, ME) organized the international conference titled [\*\*"EU at the Crossroads: How will 2017 national elections change the face of Europe?"\*\*](#) which took place on Friday **5 May 2017** in **Bratislava, Slovakia**.

Speakers (in the order of speeches):

**Flaminia Baffigo**, Coordinator of IED.

**Antonio Parziale**, Honorary Consul of Moldova in Slovakia and Founder of Mladí Európania.

**Beáta Kostilníková**, European Policies Department of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs.

**Samuel Abrahám**, Slovak political scientist and Rector of Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts in Slovakia.

**Martin Levener**, Executive manager of the European Democratic Party (PDE-EDP).

**Karen Henderson**, British political scientist and senior lecturer on EU politics at the Comenius University and BISLA in Slovakia.

**Karl Ilgenfritz**, Political advisor and one of the spokespersons on EU Affairs for Freie Wähler in Germany.

**Roman Brecely**, Member of Board of IED and former Slovak Minister of Transport.

**Barbora Meššová**, Lawyer from the League for the Human Rights in Slovakia.

**Ján Orlovský**, Director of Open Society Foundation in Slovakia.

**Roman Vilkovič**, Journalist and Editor in Chief of PlusCS London in the Great Britain.

Moderator:

**Alena BAŠISTOVÁ**, Member of the Slovak Parliament and university lecturer.



With regards to an unprecedented rise of populism, nationalism and euroscepticism in the European Union, the conference discussed four most important elections in Europe this year: the Dutch parliamentary elections that took place in March, the French presidential elections (that were just before its second round at the time of the event), June's parliamentary elections in Great Britain and the German federal elections scheduled for September. The conference was opened by the IED Coordinator **Flaminia Baffigo** and the Honorary Consul of Moldova and the Founder and Honorary Member of Mladí Európania **Antonio Parziale**. They both stressed importance of the impact of these elections on direction and very face of European project and called for a greater participation of young

people – a high number of which were sitting in the audience – in public affairs. After, a Representative of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs **Beáta Kostilníková** from the Ministry's European Policies Department presented a keynote speech. She stressed that even though we celebrated the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Rome Treaties last March, Europe has changed a lot – although European integration is advancing, there is a general political turmoil and eurosceptic feelings across the Member States. In her view, eurosceptics who criticize Brussels do not realize that EU institutions in Brussels and elsewhere are composed of people coming from all 28 Member States and that **the EU is governed by all states equally for the benefit of all citizens**. Nevertheless, she admitted that if the EU wants to prevail, it needs to be reformed. “The European Union, the greatest peace project in the world is now in danger and we cannot afford to waste more time but offer concrete proposals how to reform the EU,” she concluded.



### **European Election Storm of 2017 – Netherlands, France, Great Britain and Germany**

The first panel welcomed speakers who commented on four major national elections taking place this year. The panel was opened by a political scientist, lecturer on EU politics and Rector of Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts (BISLA) in Slovakia **Samuel Abrahám** who summarized the current political situation in the EU. In his opinion, **with an unprecedented rise of extremists over traditional political parties, the EU is truly in crisis**. Similarly, there is a crisis on both political spectrums, left and right, because traditional parties are failing to deliver and address the expanding welfare state and fulfil the expectations of voters.



***The European Union, the greatest peace project in the world is now in danger and we cannot afford to waste more time but offer concrete proposals how to reform the EU.”***

*Beáta Kostilníková*

Many traditional parties also experience corruption scandals which also disturb their public image and reliability. Consequently, more and more voters turn to new populist political forces which abuse disillusionments of those voters for their political benefit. He explained that populists rely on negative emotions (usually fears of people), simple language, popular slogans and attractive promises in order to be successful in the elections. **Voters who vote for populist and extremist parties still do not realize that their proposals and promises are just empty phrases and not the solutions because absolute majority of populist proposals are not feasible to be fulfilled in reality.**

Mr Abrahám highlighted that so far mainstream politics has not provided a proper answer to populism. He is also worried that the year 2017 is just the beginning of a deeper political crisis in the EU. Nevertheless, he argued that the current situation in the United Kingdom should be a wake-up call for the rest of the EU to mobilize against populism and extremism in politics and defend democracy. Also the victory of People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) in the March's elections in the Netherlands is a positive signal for similar defeat of the populist parties in other EU countries. “There is no alternative to liberal democracy... liberal democracy is the only hope for the future,” he stressed.

***"There is no alternative to liberal democracy... liberal democracy is the only hope for the future."***

*Samuel Abrahám*

“FillonGate” instead of focusing on policy proposals of the candidates running for Élysée Palace. He also mentioned two other important drivers of the electoral campaign – Front National’s fictitious employments and the alliance between the candidate Emanuel Macron and the Co-President of the PDE-EPD and President of Mouvement Démocrate François Bayrou (he finished third in the presidential elections in 2007). Mr Leveneur presented two possible scenarios – one scenario in which Emanuel Macron wins the elections and the second in which Marine Le Pen becomes the president. In his opinion, Macron will take necessary steps to reform the EU, restore trust among the citizens, propose more social and environmental clauses in EU agreements, strengthen Eurozone and support a greater involvement of civil society associations in political sphere. Marcon will also reform the Posted Workers’ Directive in order to proceed towards “equal work, equal pay”, support a European pillar of social rights and, in terms of security, reinforce external borders and improve functioning of common intelligence services within the EU. In case of the second option in which Marine Le Pen had become the president, she would try to move France out of the EU, restore French franc as the currency, oppose trade agreements, suppress the Posted Workers’ Directive, tax foreign workers and restore border restoration and customs barriers. Accordingly, Mr Leveneur argued that **there is a clear choice for French voters in this election – either democracy and European Union or populism, nationalism and return to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.** He thinks mobilization of pro-European voters is a key in order to ensure that democracy will win over populism in the national elections across Europe. “This election represents a key moment in modern history of France which can be a new impetus for refoundation of the European Union,” he stressed.

**Martin Leveneur**, Executive manager of the European Democratic Party (PDE-EDP) and member of Mouvement Démocrate of France, followed by the presentation focused on the French presidential elections. After analyzing the profiles of all presidential candidates, he explained that **France experienced a very uncommon and unusual election campaign before the first presidential round** because all media talked just about the so-called



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*Martin Leveneur*

[Click here to access the Full Presentation on French Presidential Elections](#)

The third speaker in the panel, a British political scientist and senior lecturer on EU politics at the Comenius University and BISLA in Slovakia **Karen Henderson** focused on the British parliamentary elections. She sees the reason for the decision of Prime Minister Theresa May to call the early elections in several facts: first of all, May has not been elected as the Prime Minister so she lacked a popular mandate; secondly, the parliamentary majority of Conservatives was small and she wanted to have a stronger mandate for herself and her party for the forthcoming Brexit negotiations; and thirdly, there was a problem in disunity within the Conservative party in which May was isolated between SEM faction (business) and hard Brexiteer faction. Regarding the British parties’ stances on Brexit, the Conservative Party seems to be rather for a harder Brexit, the Labour Party for a softer Brexit, the Scottish National Party opposes Brexit and wants to repeat the Scottish referendum for independence

in order to remain in the EU, the Liberal Democratic Party and Greens are for a softer or no Brexit, and the UKIP, naturally, for a hard Brexit. Ms Henderson also explained the specifics of the British voting system, such as the fact that percentage of votes and percentage of seats do not correspond – for

a clear illustration, when Tories won the 2015 elections, they received 36.9 % of votes which corresponded to 50.9 % of seats; in comparison, when Labour won the 2010 elections, they received 35.2 % of votes (less than Conservatives in 2015) which corresponded to 55.0 % of seats (more than Conservatives in

2015). Regarding the relationship between Brexit and populism, she thinks that Brexit is one off event and it is not relevant to populist politics in the EU as a whole. Consequently, **Brexit will very likely have much greater negative impact on the United Kingdom and its economic performance than on the EU.**

[Click here to access the Full Presentation on the British parliamentary elections](#)

After looking at the French and British elections, **Karl Ilgenfritz**, a political advisor and one of the spokespersons on EU Affairs for Freie Wähler in Germany, explained the possible impact of the German federal elections on future of the EU. “Stable pro-European majorities will continue to govern in the Bundestag,” he stressed, taking into consideration that there is a solid consensus on Europe in the political centre of German politics as long as right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) is in political isolation. As a result, **the next German Chancellor will be very likely a pro-European politician** – it will be either current German Chancellor Angela Merkel or former European Parliament’s President Martin Schulz. However, there is a danger that a left-wing, soft eurosceptic coalition composed of Social Democratic Party (SPD), Die Linke and Bündnis 90 will be formed in September. This is so because the German leftist parties are generally soft eurosceptics. In his view, **two coalitions, both pro-European, are possible to be formed after the elections – the coalition of Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and SPD or the coaolition composed of CDU, Bündnis 90 and Freie Demokraten**. “Germany has good chances to successfully contain right-wing populism,” Mr Ilgenfritz assured. He sees the reason for this partly in constant quarrels inside German right-wing parties and partly in Germany’s historical heritage due to which the country is remarkably resistant to extremist politicians. Also in comparison with other right-wing populist parties in Europe, the support for AfD is relatively small. All in all, Mr Ilgenfritz concluded that **there are good chances to maintain a pro-European course in the Bundestag**; however, he is worried that in case a left-wing “soft eurosceptic” government will be formed, a pro-European reform agenda could not be put forward.

**“Germany has good chances to successfully contain right-wing populism.”**

*Karl Ilgenfritz*

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Welcome speakers and speakers of 1.panel (left-right: F.Baffigo, A.Parziale, S.Abrahám, M.Levneur, K.Henderson, K.Ilgenfritz)

## Future of the EU – How to defeat populism and save the idea of united Europe in elections



save it and do not leave it to be taken apart by populists and extremists,” he argued. The most serious current problem of the EU is that 28 Member States cannot reach a common solution in the issues of refugee crisis or conflict in Syria. He is convinced that **not individual actions but only a common approach of all Member States can resolve the problems EU is facing now.** “History teaches us that nationalism always leads to war. Let’s be very careful here – it is in the hands of young people to keep and improve the EU and remove the concept of restoration of nation-states promoted by populists,” Mr Brecely emphasized.

A lawyer from the League for the Human Rights **Barbora Meššová** focused her contribution on migration and its impact on the rise of populism in Europe. She highlighted that **migration has always been here, it did not start in 2014.** “Migration is like weather – there is always some kind of weather and not always there is sunny,” Ms Meššová said, “promising people that migration will be stopped is the same as promising them that there will be still sunny weather. Migration is an objective phenomenon that has always been here and always will be.” In her view, the major failure is that **topic of migration was abused by populists for political purposes.**

**Ján Orlovsý**, Director of the policy institute Open Society Foundation, talked about the impact of the post-1989 development on the current situation in the EU. The end of bipolar world, accelerated globalization, climatic changes and significant demographic transformations led to the problems the EU is experiencing nowadays. He is convinced that “we, Europeans, need to address these changes effectively respecting the fact that only united approach of all EU Member States can save Europe from populism.” He also put attention on the role of media and that **professional journalists need to deliver articles based on objective information and true facts in all circumstances** so people can have access to valid and fact-based information vis-à-vis “alternative facts” and misleading information presented by populists.

The last speaker, a journalist and Editor in Chief of PlusCS London in the Great Britain **Roman Vilkovič** reminded that **we live in the longest peaceful and most prosperous times Europe has ever experienced.** However, **more and more people forget on this and take peace and relative prosperity for granted** – this is when populism and extremism start to flourish. “On the example of

The second panel presented the views of domestic experts who speculated how to effectively combat populism, extremism and anti-European rhetoric. A former Slovak Minister of Transport, Construction and Regional Development and Member of the Board of IED **Roman Brecely** compared the EU to a marriage in which people also experience better and worse moments, ups and downs. “The EU is the best project in history of our continent and therefore we need to

**“History teaches us that nationalism always leads to war.”**

*Roman Brecely*



Britain we can see that the vote for Brexit has so far brought only chaos and great uncertainty to the lives of British people,” he said, “many Britons who voted for Brexit have already regretted that choice and would like to remain in the EU.” This example should be a warning for the citizens in the EU-27 that the united Europe is the only option for peaceful and prosperous future of our continent.

The event was moderated by **Alena Bašistová**, Member of the Slovak National Council, Member of PDE-EDP and university lecturer, who also illustrated her extensive experience with populists and extremists in the Slovak political life. The conference was attended by a high number of students, representatives of NGOs, Embassies and media.



**Speakers of 2.panel and moderator(left-right: R.Brecely, B.Mešová, J.Orlovský, R.Vilkovič, A.Bašistová)**

### **Main outcomes and proposals:**

- we live in the longest peaceful and most prosperous time Europe has ever experienced but we never can take peace and prosperity for granted;
- history teaches us that nationalism and populism always led to war in Europe;
- the reason why populists have gained popularity lies in their abuse of fears and problems of citizens – populists use negative emotions, simple language, popular slogans and attractive promises to attract people;
- EU needs to regain trust of citizens who turn to euroscepticism and populism by demonstrating that Europeans live in the most prosperous and stable region in the world just thanks to the existence of the EU;
- the campaigns of Emanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen show that democratic politicians bring policies based on European integration, inter-state cooperation, freedom, fair competition and human rights that can lead to real economic prosperity and social security, whilst populists aspire to bring isolation, nationalism and protectionism that can only lead to economic and social disaster and political turmoil with very serious consequences;
- democratic political politicians, media and NGOs must promote that policy proposals of populist parties are empty phrases that are not feasible to be fulfilled and *not* the solutions to their problems;
- professional journalism must be based on objective information and true facts in all circumstances so people can access fact-based information vis-à-vis “alternative” and misleading information;
- Brexit is one off event which is not relevant to populist politics in the EU and it will very likely have much greater negative impact on the UK than on the EU;
- France and Germany will very likely see the elections of pro-European, democratic candidates and defeat of populists which must be a new impetus for refoundation of the European Union;
- only united approach of all EU Member States can save Europe from populism.

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Prepared by Adriana Ciefova (IED, 2017)

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